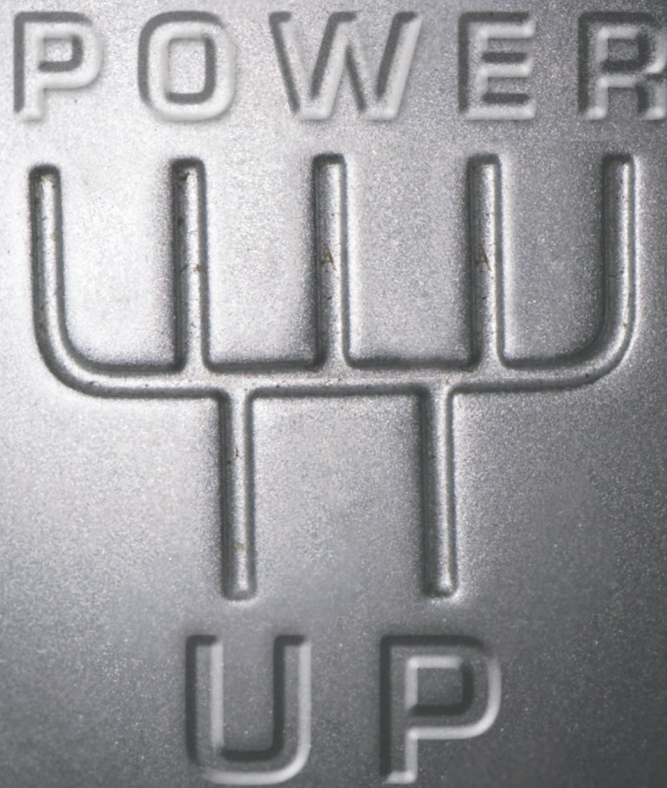


FEATURE

THE DRIVING FORCE THAT GIVES A PLN
ITS POWER TO IMPACT AND ENDURE IS PASSION.



YOUR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

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The school library can be a lonely place. These days, tight budgets and fiscal shortfalls have created a new breed of solo librarians—a group of educators who not only have to do more with less, but who, increasingly, also have to do it all alone. Some school librarians are even serving multiple schools or entire districts—juggling it all just to make certain their students’ needs are met. No matter what the circumstances, however, the feeling of being spread too thin is all too familiar to many of us. Now more than ever, we need support networks: people with whom we can share resources, swap stories, and lend a hand. Luckily, in today’s globally connected world, developing just such a network is easier than ever.

What’s a PLN?

A PLN or “personal learning network” is a group of people who are connected by shared passions or common interests, and who benefit from shared learning. PLNs have been around for a long time. In the past, however, the reach of our PLNs extended no farther than the walls of our schools, districts, or the occasional professional conference. Today, the access that we have through technology enables us to stretch our PLNs beyond the limitations of our physical spaces or cohort of coworkers. Social media afford us the ability to form instant connections with other people globally. At the same time, technology eliminates the necessity of a face-to-face connection in order for us to consider someone a part of our learning network. We live in connected times, and the same technology that affords us the chance to connect our students with other learners or content-area experts from around the world also allows us to build our own networks of learners and experts with whom we get to learn and share.

That said, Twitter, Facebook, Skype, and other forms of social media are not the forces that bind connected educators together. Rather, these are merely the tools that we use to communicate and connect. As important as those tools are to the building of a PLN, they are not the most important element. The driving force that gives a PLN its power to impact and endure is passion. Having shared passions is the glue that binds together any group of people, and personal learning networks are no exception. As school librarians, the list of passions that drive our work is nearly endless: teaching, learning, a love of reading and books, encouraging student engagement, emerging technologies, research and information literacy, and/or the desire to continually improve our craft. The list goes on and on. Whatever that shared element is, however, it is passion that makes these connections both sustainable and meaningful.

At the same time, while technology makes connecting with those who share our passions easier than ever, it also opens the door to connections with a broad spectrum of professionals—teachers, administrators, public/academic librarians, and even authors—from whom we often have much to learn. Unlike the traditional professional-development model that often groups participants by job types, the best and most effective PLNs are made up of individuals who challenge each other’s assumptions and force members to look at the world from new and different perspectives. Indeed, it is this mixture of shared passions and different perspectives that equates to perfect recipe for PLN success!

Path to Your PLN

Although everyone’s journey to building a PLN is unique, almost every story begins with a search. While some states and districts are requiring educators to participate in PLNs, the most effective networks are sparked by an authentic need. Maybe it’s the hunt for new ideas, the desire to feel connected to others who are facing the same challenges, support for a project, data to help advocate for a program, or just the need to fill the vacuum of not having like-minded educators at arm’s reach. Either way, many educators can trace the spark that began their PLNs to an initial quest for information, a hand reached out for support, or a plea for help in solving a real and immediate problem.

Four Basic Stages

Because PLNs are, at their core, *personal* it probably goes without saying that every PLN is made up of individuals whose journey in creating a learning network is as unique as its members. However, even though each PLN is specialized to its creator, many educators go through a similar process when developing their own personal learning networks.

1. Consumption

One of the wonderful things about social networks is that they provide the participant with a seemingly endless stream of new information. On the other hand, one of the most daunting things about a social media tool is that it provides the user with a seemingly endless stream of new information! Knowing how to get started can be a huge challenge. This reality is why the first step in developing a PLN is often the establishment of a one-way relationship. That is to say, most connected educators start out by simply consuming information.

Four Basic STAGES



consume

1



connect

2



create

3



contribute

4



**THE INSPIRATION
RECEIVED THROUGH A
PERSONAL LEARNING
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CONTAGIOUS.**

Whether it's through Twitter, blogs, or a Google+ hangout, during this first stage, many PLN newbies do little more than lurk, quietly observing what school librarians around the country are doing in their libraries. Perhaps lurkers are seeking ideas for a project or looking for examples of how other school librarians make the most of a fixed schedule. Whatever their motivation, these info consumers are taking it all in, making mental notes and processing how this new flood of ideas can impact their teaching. The thing to remember is that it's okay to lurk. Simply absorbing all that others have to share is a natural first step. Eventually, however, you may get to the point where merely consuming information is not enough.

2. Connection

Spend any amount of time with someone who has developed a personal learning network, and you're bound to hear the phrase "life-changing" in some form or another. And it's true; building a network of like-minded, passion-driven educators with whom learning and sharing is both frequent and meaningful is no less than a life-changing experience. That said, after spending some time learning from others in your network, it's only natural to want to reach out and connect with those who are having a significant impact on your professional life.

Even if you began your journey with no intention of doing anything more than gathering a few new resources, you may soon find yourself commenting on a blog, attending and asking questions during a webinar, or even responding to others on Twitter. By putting yourself out there you are opening the door to making connections.

These connections may remain little more than an exchange of pleasantries, a heartfelt "thank you" for sharing a resource, or a few more followers on Twitter, but the interactions may also develop into collaborative partnerships, spirited debates, and even full-fledged friendships that blossom in person at conferences or scheduled "tweet ups." Regardless of how connections grow, however, connecting with others not only builds that sense of empowerment that makes PLNs so amazing, but also helps remind us that we're not alone.

3. Creation

Another natural result of the PLN process is the desire to apply some of what's being learned to your own practice. So much of what happens in a PLN is the REcreating of ideas—taking what someone else has already done and building on it in a way that will make it work for you and your students. Even the most talented school librarians have a finite number of ideas and innovative programs up their sleeves. This kind of remixing of ideas, which naturally grows from having a PLN, ensures that your students, staff, and administration will never go without quality instruction, inspired professional development, and skillfully culled data radiating from the library. For everything from lesson plans to school library displays, having a PLN forces even the most skilled practitioners to up their games—a professional bump that others are bound to notice and that you won't be able to keep a secret for long.

4. Contribution

The inspiration received through a personal learning network is positively contagious. That feeling of needing a high-five after a particularly successful lesson or the

TIFF'S STORY

sensation that you might just burst if you don't tell someone about how the school library program is impacting student achievement seems to grow exponentially with the creation of a PLN. For many, there comes a point where they simply feel compelled and obligated to share. Whether you join a regularly scheduled Twitter chat, create a blog where you reflect on the library's role in student learning, or manage a wiki where you and others share resources, contributing to the conversation and adding your voice to a chorus of educators who are changing teaching and librarianship through their top-notch work are the completion of the PLN circle. After all, who wouldn't want to be a part of the grassroots educational revolution in education that's taking place on Twitter and in the blogosphere. Plus, who knows what kind of impact your work might have on another educator? In some ways, having a PLN is the ultimate example of "paying it forward": taking information received, crafting it into great practice, and sharing it as a remixed spark of inspiration for someone new. That's the power of a PLN!

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I SPENT MY FIRST YEAR in the school library trying not to let myself become too overwhelmed. While it was a busy year with many new challenges, at the end I felt successful. However, I knew that I could grow to do so much better; I just needed the ideas and inspiration. I had recently started blogging about my experiences in the library, the books I read, lessons taught, and activities with my students. I was also doing lots of online reading and researching. While searching for info about elementary school library programs and activities, I came across the TL Ning <<http://teacherlibrarian.ning.com>>. This became a resource that I used constantly to gather ideas and seek input from others. Links on the Ning and other articles I was reading led me to start following the blogs of numerous other school librarians who were doing amazing things with their students.

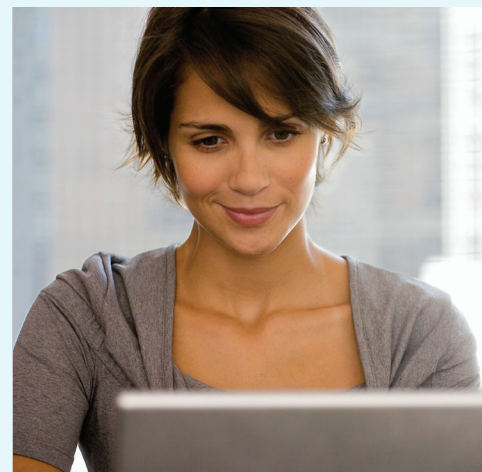
The winter of 2009–2010 was the time when I really started to immerse myself in the growing online community of school librarians and ed-tech folks. I became obsessed! I filled up my Google Reader and constantly added to the list of blogs I followed. I joined Twitter and began to understand how valuable it was to be able to be continuously connected to other educators.

Before I really even knew what a PLN was, I had started to build mine at full force. Later that spring my principal asked if I was interested in attending the International Society for Technology in Education conference that summer. I had the opportunity to meet many members of my PLN, educators from whom I had already learned so much. Meeting these friends face-to-face really solidified for me the importance of my PLN. I know I am infinitely better at my job because of the inspiration and camaraderie I glean from my network.

JENNIFER'S STORY

I WAS A CLASSROOM TEACHER who thought school librarians were irrelevant until someone proved me wrong. That teacher-turned-librarian inspired me to give up my red pen for a book cart and move my practice into the classroom with the most books. What I didn't realize, however, is that once I got there, not only would I have no idea what to do, but that no one else in my building would know either. In the fall of 2007, wondering if I'd made a terrible mistake, I began to look to the Web for ideas and inspiration. Soon, I'd stumbled across a few blogs where other school librarians were sharing ideas and thoughts. That same year, I attended my state's tech conference and discovered RSS feeds, a discovery that immediately ratcheted up my ability to learn from other library colleagues who were willing to share their ideas and thoughts about student learning and the role school librarians had to play in impacting it.

In truth, I had no intention of ever contributing to the resource I was coming to rely on so heavily. But then in 2008 I was fortunate enough to attend the AASL national conference where I learned about Twitter and how it was being used by teachers all over



the world. At the same time, my state legislature (like so many others) was making some pretty tough choices regarding education funding and, by extension, school libraries and library personnel. In the end, it was the feeling that I could not let school libraries in my state go down without a fight that led me to start my own blog and toss my ideas into the Twitterverse. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was building a PLN.

Soon, I was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of ideas, inspiration, and pure camaraderie that continues to define my network. What began as purely an advocacy tool has grown into constant, meaningful, real-time professional development that has an immeasurable impact on my practice. While I've had the chance to meet only a few members of my PLN in person, their wisdom and friendship continue to inspire me to make a difference for students every day.

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PLN BASIC BUILDING BLOCKS

WEBINARS

A great way to start to get to know other active online educators is to participate in live webinars. The TL Virtual Cafe <<http://tlvirtualcafe.wikispaces.com>> offers free monthly webinars on topics pertinent to school librarians. Many well-known voices in the library and ed-tech worlds have presented webinars, which are also archived and available for viewing at any time. When participating in a live webinar, you not only get to hear the great ideas from the presenter, but you can also use the chat window to interact and share with the other participants.

Additional resources, including webinars (although not all are free), are accessible through SimpleK12 <<http://simplek12.com>>.

BLOGS/RSS FEEDS

If you are looking for great ideas on programs and activities that others are doing in their school libraries (and aren't we all?), blogs are a great place to look. Once you start following a few blogs that you really enjoy, your list of blogs can quickly grow as you follow the links from blog to blog. Using an RSS reader such as Google Reader <www.google.com/reader> makes following a number of blogs fast and easy. Google Reader allows you to subscribe to many different blogs, streaming all of the updates into one simple feed. In your

reader you can create folders for different types of blogs, such as those about school libraries, ed-tech, book reviews, and others.



NING

Ning allows for the creation of smaller, specialized social networks. Joining a Ning gives you access to "friend" other members, send messages, participate in discussion forums, join groups, view and post photos, videos, links, and blogs, and share calendar events. Nings offer a great collection of shared resources and commentary from discussions. Joining and interacting on a Ning is a great place to start if you're worried about feeling overwhelmed by tools and the idea of building a PLN.

The Ning for school librarians to join: <<http://teacherlibrarian.ning.com>>

Other educational Ning options: <<http://classroom20.com>> and <<http://edupln.ning.com>>

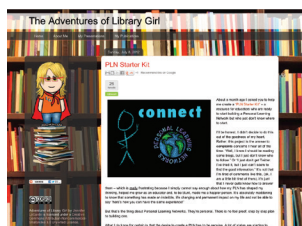


TWITTER

If you are ready to get serious and develop your PLN, then you need to be on Twitter! A large network of educators is active on Twitter and constantly sharing resources. Spend some time lurking and observing to see what it's all about, and then gradually become more active. If you are hesitant to sign up for an account right away, you can subscribe to the #tlchat Daily

<<http://paper.li/tag/tlchat>> and receive an e-mail with updates on popular items that school librarians are sharing on Twitter.

Put some thought into choosing the right Twitter handle for you. It should be something that represents you professionally and can reasonably stay with you for years to come. To be as transparent and credible as possible, consider using your real name or some form of your professional title. Once you are ready to take the plunge and become active on Twitter, start following people who have similar passions and share resources that you find valuable. Focus on following people who are sharing quality links and ideas, people who are going to have an impact on your learning and, in turn, impact your students' learning. Use the "PLN Starter Kit" that is described below to learn how to use Twitter and who to start off following. Make sure you respond to tweets that really grab you! That's how you start the conversation, get to know the members of your PLN, and spark great collaborative projects.



PLN STARTER KIT FOR THE SCHOOL LIBRARIAN

Check out this LiveBinder on building your PLN: <www.librarygirl.net/2012/07/pln-starter-kit.html>. This resource (crowdsourced and curated by Jennifer LaGarde) contains links to articles about growing your PLN, as well as lists of active educators on Twitter and in the

blogging community. As time progresses, you will be able to further develop your PLN based on your interests and needs, but this LiveBinder provides you with an excellent place to start with some high-quality educators to follow.

START YOUR OWN BLOG

Twitter is great for sharing links and having interactions with other educators in 140 characters or less, but you may want to be able to elaborate more on the things you are sharing. Authoring a blog allows you the opportunity to reflect on your practice, and

share your successes and failures. You may want to blog from the perspective that your audience would be other school librarians and educators, looking at your practice through that lens. If you want to get involved in the blogging community, take the time to read and leave comments on other blogs to get a feel for what blogging is all about.

Free blogging platforms include WordPress <www.wordpress.com>, Google's Blogger <www.blogger.com>, and Edublogs <www.edublogs.org>.

Photo by Julia McPherson



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